

September 14, 2006

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(applause) *Tanu Rabanan*. This is what our teachers taught us. One day, when Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus fell ill, his disciples came to visit him. Somebody's talking -- can you not talk now? And the disciples asked the teacher, "What must one do [00:01:00] to be worthy of his part in the world to come?" And he replied, "Be respectful to one another." Question: the old teacher is in bed, probably ailing, suffering. Is that the time for his pupils to bother him with hypothetical problems about the other world, afterlife? And the answer is it was their way of demonstrating their respect for him -- though invalid, in their eyes he remained their teacher. They respected him. But then, a follow-up question may seem in order: Since they showed the old master that they were capable of respect, why did he feel it necessary to speak about it? The answer: The meaning of his words was that it isn't enough for pupils to respect their [00:02:00] teacher; it is equally important for all of them to respect one another.

Human relations clearly play a major role in the Talmudic texts. The very first tractate that the young student would learn in

school, in the cheder, was not about the Sabbath and its laws, nor about Yom Kippur and its rituals, but rather about the conflict that pits two people against each other, as they unveil the tractate of Bava Metzia or the Middle Gate to the Talmud. The relationship between men and God belongs to yet another world. Its breath seems paradoxically lesser. Theoretically, it is enough for a Jew to say the *Shema Yisrael* in order to be an integral part of the community, worthy of divine care.

[00:03:00] The desire to come closer to heaven, even while renouncing our fellow human beings who live nearby on earth, is not recommended in the Talmud. Only God is alone; man is not. This is a lesson that we have learned day after day, each of us, since we were born, until the end. To condemn the other to solitude, thus to humiliation, and self-doubt, and despair is an offense often leveled against our common creator. In Scripture we read the following passage:

God speaks to his people: "When you go out to war against your enemies and you see horses and chariots, fighting people, many more than you, [00:04:00] do not be frightened, for your God is with you." Then the leaders speak to the people, and they say, "Who is the man who has built a new home and has not yet dedicated it, let him go and return to his house. And who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not yet benefited

from its fruit? Let him go home. And who is the man who has betrothed a woman and has not yet married her? Let him go home." And then came the fourth category: "Who is the man who is afraid and soft of heart? Let him also go home."

Strange. For purely human and compassionate reasons, we understand the first three categories, [00:05:00] but what about the last one? Why is the coward included in the list of military dispensations of military service? And the explanation is naïve and beautiful: so as not to embarrass him in public, and therefore, when the weakling leaves the ranks, people could think, "Perhaps he has a bride at home, or a new house, or a vineyard," and therefore he feels better. Now, show me another tradition in which the coward is treated so magnanimously, especially when it comes to military service in times of war.

Another example, which is more topical: When we daven [00:06:00] in shul and reach the silent *Amidah* prayer, we wait for the cantor, and the cantor waits for the rabbi. The cantor waits for the rabbi to conclude the *Amidah*, and therefore the cantor needs not to wait if several worshippers haven't finished yet, but if there is only one, only one who is still praying, the shaliach tzibur, which means the officiating person, must wait for him. The reason: not to make him feel alone and abandoned.

In other words, the emphasis is on the individual. The collective gathering, composed of individuals, owes every one of them affection and, above all, respect. [00:07:00]

But at this point, as always, let us stop in our study for a brief moment for our traditional preliminary remarks. We have followed this custom for 40 years, why stop now? So, one: The overall objective of our annual encounters is to celebrate study, always. "*V'hagita bo yomam valilah*" -- learning as a full-time endeavor -- "You shall study Torah day and night." The passion for study must be contagious. Does learning bring rewards? No, it is its own rewards. It is an adventure in which the quest offers as much joy as does its attaining moment.

Two, if we chose tonight to discuss ways and reasons to oppose intolerance, it is because it exists and grows in too many [00:08:00] quarters under a variety of disguises.

Three, study transcends time and space. It is never too late to begin. Rabbi Akiva was 40 when he learned aleph-bet, the alphabet. Thanks to his resolve to acquire knowledge, he attracted the attention of Rachel, the beautiful daughter of a wealthy landowner. She fell in love with him because of his passion for learning, and the rest is legend.

What will we learn from it? We learn many things from our study. We learn, for a Jew, the love of Israel is paramount. A Jew must practice the commandment of *Ahavat Yisrael*, the love of Israel, which means, especially for us who live in diaspora, to love Israel [00:09:00] in her fear, to love Israel in her joy, to love Israel in her distress, to love Israel in her dreams -- to love Israel, period. *Ahavat Yisrael* is a commandment that must envelop our endeavor into our soul. But when it comes to learning, one thing we do know: you may come anytime, but do not be late. Don't wait outside. We are not intolerant. We accept latecomers. The doors are open. Come and join us.

When we speak of tolerance in the Talmud, of course we have a verse which we must repeat and we do repeat so often, which is *ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocha*, You must [00:10:00] love your fellow human being as you love yourself, which means you must love the other. But who is the other? An enemy? A foreigner? An alien? Someone who has been excluded? In Scripture, the term is *re'a* -- as we say, *ve'ahavta lere'akha kamokha ki ani Adoshem*, "And you will love your *re'a* as yourself because I am God."

Several fundamental questions arise from this fundamental verse. Almost essential for all those who in the Jewish tradition deal with human relationships. First, what is the precise definition of the word *re'a*? Indeed, it doesn't really exist. Some say "neighbor" -- you love your neighbor -- [00:11:00] companion, peer, fellow, or friend. One thing is sure, though: it is another person, so *re'a* is the other. Second, let's address grammar. Ramban, or Nachmanides, who lived in the thirteenth century, was already wondering about the strange construction of this verse. Why "*ve'ahavta lere'acha*" and not "*et re'acha*"? Those who know grammar -- and I'm sure all of you, especially Dor Chadash, you must know Hebrew. (laughter) It's a pertinent question, because, remember, grammatically you must say "*ve'ahavta et re'acha*," "You must love your companion, your friend." The term "*ve'ahavta*," "you will love," appears three times in the Bible. [00:12:00] "*Ve'ahavta et Adoshem Elokecha* - - "And you will love your God." Remember, *et Adoshem*. Then, "*Ve'ahavta et ha-ger*" -- *et* again, *et* -- "You will love the stranger." And finally, "*Ve'ahavta lere'acha*," as if to say, "And your love should go to your friend." So two times out of three, the Bible uses the *et*; only once is it *le*, in this case. Why this difference?

According to Nachmanides, who lived in Catholic Spain and participated in the rigged yet great Barcelona dispute in the cathedral before fleeing to the Holy Land for winning the debate, *le* is weaker than *et* in his eyes. "Ve'ahavta et" means "bekhol levavkha," "You will love with all your heart." "You will love your Lord your God with all your heart and all [00:13:00] your soul." "Lere'acha" would thus mean that your love for others should have boundaries. One interpretation which has the same gist but lends itself to greater precision is attributed to the Rashbam, the grandson of Rashi, who lived and taught in the twelfth century, and the Rambam asserts, "Yes, I must love the *re'a* like myself, but only if he is good, only if he is righteous, only if he's a decent neighbor, a true companion. If he isn't, I have the right and even the obligation to look elsewhere."

For my part, I would actually like to add, with respect and modesty, a minor commentary to the second part of the verse, "Ani Adoshem," "I am God." What does this proclamation have to do with "You will love your neighbor or your fellow man [00:14:00] as yourself?" At first glance, "Ani Adoshem," "I am God," would seem out of place because it is superfluous. If at this point in scripture we still don't know that God is God, our intelligence would be lacking, as would our memory. It is the

word *kamocho*, "as yourself," that pointed me in a new direction. To be honest, it always bothered me. Let's repeat the verse again, shall we? *Ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho*, comma, *ani Adoshem*. "You will love your neighbor as yourself, comma, for I am God." And there is something disturbing in this commandment. What if the person about whom we are talking doesn't love himself, not in the least? (laughter) Should he then not love his neighbor? [00:15:00] And if by chance I wake one day and realize in fact that I like suffering, should I therefore make my neighbor suffer as well? (laughter)

When a verse disturbs me, it's quite simple: First I reread it one time, several times. Contrary to the rules associated with literature, repetition is encouraged in Talmudic study. I then try to find out what our great masters in the past centuries have said on the subject. I compare one to the other, I have a critical look at one distinct from the other, and after all this, if I am still not satisfied, I go back again to the original verse. And here's what I found: And what if the good Jew in me does something which has not been done before, and what if we moved the [00:16:00] comma? Instead of saying "You will love your neighbor as yourself," comma, "I am God," I propose that you instead read it this way: "You will love your neighbor, like you, *kamocho*, yourself, I am God." "I am like

you." In other words, God says, "Like you, I am." As you are with your neighbor or with your friend or with your comrade, I am with you. If you are generous and compassionate with him, I'll be with you. Is that it? Is that really all we can say about this verse? You guessed it, the answer is no. In the Talmud, no discussion is ever fully finished. The Bible has no beginning, but the Talmud has no end. (laughter) [00:17:00] Even today in Jerusalem and Paris, and in New York, no doubt, scholarly works appear on the Talmud, each with its own *chidushim*, its innovations, on yet another problem, which apparently reveals even more challenges.

Let's stay a little longer with this verse. One day, the great Rabbi Akiva, who we've mentioned already, the husband of Rachel -- their story is one of the greatest love stories, really, in literature, in Jewish literature. So he pronounced, Rabbi Akiva pronounced, the following: "*Ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho zeh klal gadol baTorah.*" In plain English: To love one's neighbor or peer or friend is a major principle in the Torah. Okay, who would deny that? But once again, in the Talmud, we can deny even that. (laughter) Let's listen to Simeon ben Azzai, companion of Rabbi Akiva, one of the four [00:18:00] masters to have penetrated the *pardes*, the orchard of forbidden knowledge. He doesn't agree. According to him, the verse "*Eleh toldot*

adam," and here are the origins of man -- that is much more an important principle than Rabbi Akiva's.

But you may say, Why compare them? What's the use? Can't we leave it both? We don't see it unless we look one more time at the biblical verse. *Ve'ahavta lere'acha*, You will love your neighbor, you will love your friend, your companion -- yes. Up until now we have analyzed each word individually, distinctly, in the context of the phrase, but now it's time to ask questions about the social, ethnic, and religious meaning of this neighbor. Who is the *re'a*? Is he a Jew [00:19:00] and only a Jew? But then, wouldn't that exclude 99 percent of the human race, if not more so? We are a small people. We have always been a small people. We are now 14 million. In 1939 we were 18 million. And I should say therefore, I should I only have this attitude towards the *r'ea* who is Jewish but not to others? Then what about the universality in the Bible? What happened to it?

Let's reassure ourselves. As in all Talmudic discussions, opinions are split here as well. Certain scholars, with the proof to back it up, are convinced that the idea applied only to Jews simply because the Jews need us more than others. Who needs [00:20:00] a friend? A Jew, because he has no friends. (laughter) The verse, therefore, has but one goal: to reinforce

a Jewish sense of solidarity. But others, with their own convincing evidence, are persuaded to the contrary. Their proof? When the Hebrews are getting ready to leave Egypt in the time of the pharaohs, God commands Moses to tell them to borrow gold and silver jewelry from their Egyptian neighbors and acquaintances, and the term used derives from *r'ea*. In other words, in Egypt, the *r'ea* was an Egyptian. In other words, it behooves a Jew to be attentive, receptive, and helpful to those who need us, who need our generosity, who need our intelligence, or simply our presence. [00:21:00]

And this is where we come back to Ben Azzai, for whom the origins of man represent the most important principle of the Torah. Why is this? Because it emphasizes the common past of all human beings. Since all have the same origin, no one is consequently superior or inferior in the eyes of the creator. Each individual, every community, each religion deserves the respect of all as long as others accord us the same attitude. Yet the word *r'ea* appears also in one of the most moving biblical commandments. This is the entire verse: "*Lo tikom v'lo titor et b'nei amekha,*" "You will not seek vengeance, you will not hold a grudge [00:22:00] against the children of your people." "*Lo ta'amod al dam re'akha,*" "You will not stand by while the blood of your neighbor or your friend is spilled."

Here again, opinions are divided. Are we dealing with a single verse, in which case the term *re'akha* concerns only Jews, or with two verses, in which each case *re'akha* would encompass all humanity? For us to decide.

Let's consider a purely Talmudic law. The Bible commands us to help the poor, whose distress should rouse up in us, but which ones? There are so many everywhere. So the completely practical question follows: As a Jew, whom should I help? Only Jews? Surely those in Israel. When Israel [00:23:00] is concerned, our solidarity must be total. But there are also Jews who still live in countries where danger looms large -- in the former Soviet Union, in some Arab countries. Well, what do we do with them? And then you have right here in New York the elderly, the sick, the homeless who are not Jewish. Do I have the right to turn my attention away from them? The Talmud, with marvelous sensitivity, makes this clarification: "*Anyei irkha kodmin*" "Priority goes to those who live in your town." Notice the distinction: priority, yes, but not exclusivity.

I had this question posed to me recently because of Darfur.

[00:24:00] Two events: One was we had in April a huge demonstration in Washington for Darfur. Since I was involved in it since the year 2000, of course I came there -- for a few

minutes, but I came -- and I was very proud to see so many young Jews were there from all the schools, many of them with kippot. There were more Jews than non-Jews who came to help the Muslim victims in Darfur. And the second event was today. I was invited to address the Security Council on Darfur, and we had the session, and we were two, one of them who was very, very beloved by all the secretaries in the building, George Clooney. (laughter) And it was a good feeling. [00:25:00] Here, I, the Jew, totally committed to whatever is Jewish, feel and felt and still feel that we as Jews must be sensitive to other people's pain, other people's fear, simply because when we needed others, they didn't come. When we needed others to come to help us, nobody came. So we must show that it's possible, it is possible to help simply by speaking up, simply by sensitizing the other.

In the Talmud, tolerance in debate leads to the encouragement of discussions. The entire Talmud means dialogue, the respect of dialogue. A single idea is almost not allowed, it's surely not existent. At the great [00:26:00] Sanhedrin, a court consisting of 23 judges meets when there is a capital punishment case. If all are in favor, the sentence is immediately thrown out of court. First, it is inconceivable that 23 Jews would be able to agree on whatever the issue may be. (laughter) Secondly, how is it possible that not even one among them experiences a bit more

tolerance and empathy towards the solitary and defenseless defendant? At that time, there were still no lawyers; each judge was both the defense and the prosecution at the same time. And here there is one defendant and 23 judges who are up against him. Thirdly, throwing out the sentence, [00:27:00] they demand that the court go further in its debate of the accused person's guilt, so it is actually to encourage debate. We should make note that capital punishment does not enjoy any good press in the Talmud. The judges are asked to do everything, to imagine it all so as not to condemn someone to death. In fact, the execution of a guilty person, so it seems to me, even if I may be wrong, does not exist in Talmudic literature. By the same token, everything is foreseen, just in case.

Also in the commentaries, there are, shall we say, some strange cases. For instance, I give you a question. Once again, let's say a man is being led to his execution. On the way, he and the guards hear a voice. "Hey, Yidden, Jews, we need a tenth man for the minyan." (laughter) And he is going [00:28:00] to be executed. What is the law? (laughter) Can the condemned man be part of the minyan and let the executioner wait an hour? (laughter) Marvelous.

You should know, in Jewish jurisprudence at those times, and the Bible too, the emphasis is on the witnesses, not on the judges. Everything is about true witnesses or false witnesses, in order to save, to protect the life, of the defendant.

"Tolerance" in Hebrew means *sovlanut*. *Savlanut* is "patience."

In this word there is *sevel*, or suffering, and *sabbal*, or bearer. We are all bearers. Bearers of what? Distant memories of Jerusalem destroyed and rebuilt 17 times over, bloody pogroms, and dreams of flight. [00:29:00] Is it necessary to be patient in suffering and tolerant in persecution? Tolerance toward whom? The persecutor? The Talmud tells us here not to overdo our compassion. "*Kol ha-merachem*," says the Talmud: "Whoever feels kindness toward someone cruel, we'll see him show cruelty to those who are kind and charitable." Don't push tolerance too far. Which allows us to tackle, within the context of fanaticism, the one which strikes me as the oldest and most widespread, and certainly the most currently relevant. I am talking about anti-Semitism. The tortures and assassins of Jews; the anti-Semitic campaign in Arab countries; suicide terrorists in Israel; the Iranian president's inflammatory, [00:30:00] offensive, backward comments that there was no Holocaust but that there will be one. What do these all have in common? Hate of the Jew and the Jewish people.

I'm waging a campaign -- I talked about earlier -- I'm waging a campaign now on television everywhere to declare Ahmadinejad a persona non grata all over the world. (applause) This man, who wants publicly, and says so all the time, the destruction of Israel, should not be invited anywhere in the world. The only place that he should stay is there in Iran. (applause) The second point in my campaign is to expel Iran from the United Nations. [00:31:00] (applause) A regime that wants to build nuclear weapons to destroy Israel -- which means a member state is advocating the destruction of another member state -- has no place in the United Nations, according to the charter, according to the Genocide Convention.

Well, anti-Semitism in power is dangerous. We must be aware who is an anti-Semite. Someone right next to me, or on the other side of the world, whom I have never met, and who nonetheless hates me. Indeed, an anti-Semite is someone who hated me before I was born. The anti-Semite cannot stand me because I am too Jewish, or not enough, meaning too assimilated; rich or poor; young or old; pious or agnostic; educated or illiterate. All the contradictions of human nature converge [00:32:00] in anti-Semitism. Why this hate for us? Is it because we are the only people from antiquity to have survived antiquity? Is it that in

spite of persecutions and attempts to convert us, we have refused to disappear from history? In 1945, I was convinced that there would no longer be anti-Semitism, that it passed away with its victims in Treblinka and Auschwitz, but I was wrong. Only the victims perished; anti-Semitism is alive and well. A sad statement. If Auschwitz has not cured the world of anti-Semitism, what can and what will? What the world seems to forget is that a person who hates a Jew also hates other minorities, other religions, other ethnic groups, and ends up hating all humanity. It is a cancer whose cells devour [00:33:00] others unless action is taken to stop them.

Let's remember that Talmud means "study." To study the Talmud is to study the act of study itself, to question the question, to indefinitely pursue the road leading to knowledge and the road from knowledge to faith, and the road from faith to truth. Remember, the composition of the Talmud happened over a period of 400 years, at turbulent times marked by political, social, and religious upheavals. Foreign armies came and went, strong-handed authorities of the Temple rose to power and disappeared. Persecution and oppression in different forms, all trying to stifle the Jewish soul and thought, yet the voice of Torah was never silenced, nor was the dialogue. In the Talmud, the dialogue plays out not only among the living [00:34:00] but also

among the dead. Sometimes a master is dialoging with another master who had died a hundred years before him. A masterpiece of Jewish memory and fidelity to ancestors and groundbreakers, the Talmud, which counts two and a half million words, has served as guide, light, and support for our extended travels through often hostile time and territory.

Ten years, 20 years have elapsed since the national catastrophe which culminated in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple, and yet Judea continues to live, to believe, to pray, to transmit words that have echoed in its heart since Sinai. Defeated Jewish warriors are dispersed throughout an empire, but Jewish honor has not been blemished. Hadrian [00:35:00] and his cruel edicts will not prevail. Jewish passion for learning, Jewish quest for truth and morality constitute an antidote to despair. Young freedom fighters are already organizing clandestine bases in the mountains, and when they finally strike at the occupying legions, their struggle will be remembered as one of the most glorious in history. In his message to the senate in Rome, Hadrian will omit the traditional phrase, "I and your soldiers are well." That phrase does not figure in his message because his soldiers are not well. Armies come and go, as do empires, but people's dreams never die. The law given to man in the desert in the hope of

vanquishing the desert inside man will enhance his inner sovereignty and thirst for immortality, to prove the ruins of Jewish nationhood are still visible everywhere in those times, but Judea [00:36:00] is already demonstrating an astonishing vitality, living its present without denying its past.

Those sages, those disciples of the law, those men drunk with God's word, how did they manage not to yield to sadness and resignation? They managed. At Yavneh, for instance, a city of ideas, founded and extolled by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, one hears the heart of Judea singing its hope and clinging to its memory. Although for another 10 years, a Jewish king, Agrippa II, occupies a legitimate throne. No one pays attention to him. People know of his admiration for and his subservience to Rome. He may be king, but for all practical purposes, he remains an assimilated Jew. In times of crisis, when Israel's collective destiny is at stake, people turn [00:37:00] not to him but to the sages, to the teachers and their students, the repositories of ancient and living knowledge, and knowledge both eternal and mystically urgent. In the academies of learning, the scholars transcend their differences and spread the world of Israel, the history of its relations and experiments with God from city to city.

What is it that our enemies devote such hate to it? They don't hold it against us for the Bible, but we are resented for the Talmud. In the Middle Ages, the church pursued it with the same force that was used to persecute those who studied it. Is this because in the church's eyes, it countered the New Testament, or is it due to the fact that Jesus makes only a slight appearance, barely in parentheses, in the Talmud? [00:38:00] Would this be the reason why in some cases the Vatican had allowed the publication of the Talmud but censored any reference to Jesus? Are there other, more simple and concrete, examples? For those who know Jewish history, there is no doubt that without the Talmud and the love with which we learn it from childhood, our people would not have survived so many exiles. It is the Talmud that preserved the Jewishness of the Jew. In order to understand the Jewish connection to the Talmud, one need only read and listen to the distressing litany that Rabbi Yechiel of Paris in the tenth, eleventh centuries, composed at the sight of tractates of the Talmud being consumed by flames before a cheering crowd by order of the good King Louis IX, who, for reasons which escape me, people still insist on calling Saint [00:39:00] Louis. When clouds of lead and blood cover the skies, it is the feverish and enchanting legends of the Talmud and the Midrash that the Jew finds consolation and hope.

Study helps transform time into a challenge; by transcending the present, one lives outside of time, where words and symbols have a weight that far surpasses them. An ordinary event, an argument between shopkeepers, some episode rising out of the everyday, attains a sacred dimension. That's what the Talmud is. Denying what is petty, vulgar, frivolous, and obscene, it raises even what is futile and lowly to a noble stature of exchange and dialogue -- a dialogue with the living, even with the atheist. The ethics of our fathers teaches us "*V'da mah shetashiv l'epikoros*" "Know how to respond [00:40:00] to a disbeliever." So one must speak to him and learn well enough to know how to speak to him, what to answer his arguments.

A dialogue also with the dead, as we said, with the teaching of scholars who are no longer among us. At times, therefore, we meet extraordinary sages who don't live in the same time and the same place, and yet they participate in the debate which belongs to different generations. But even when one disputes your opinion of another, it is done with respect. There is nothing mean in their exchanges, never a sign of contempt, never a trace of animosity.

The best example of the spirit of tolerance that pervades the entire Talmud is the approach illustrating the relationship

between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel -- fierce [00:41:00] adversaries on almost all issues, and yet now bound not only in friendship but also in intellectual integrity, involved in the same search for meaning in all things. Shammai and Hillel, pillars and beacons of the oral tradition, spiritual directors, guides, and sages, interpreters of the eternal word in the present, leaders of the powerful and prestigious Sanhedrin, spiritual masters of the Great Assembly, the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah. The two are inseparable. Could one have existed without the other? Familiar through their ideas, their legal arguments, their disposition, we know actually little about them. Biographical portraits are sketchy, unfinished. What we do know is that they were almost always at opposite ends of the spectrum from each other. It's enough [00:42:00] to know how one interprets a verse in order to figure out the reaction of the other. When one whispers yes, you can bet that the other will scream no. Hillel is flexible, patient, does not raise his voice, never sends anyone away, tolerant, comprehensive, while his adversary fancies himself as severe, demanding, gloomy, irritable. Hillel never puts you in a guilt trip or gives you any inferiority complex, unlike Shammai, who manages to accumulate along the way, be his own or ours, hindrances, difficulties, and obstacles no end. Shammai remains rigid,

uncompromising on all points, impossible to budge, as opposed to Hillel, who stays close by to help you in all scenarios.

An example: The law demands that we take delight in a bride [00:43:00] on the day of her wedding. The Talmud tells us how, by saying "*Kallah na'ah ve'chasudah.*" We must say how beautiful and gracious she is on the day of her wedding. But, we wonder, what happens if, poor thing, she's neither one nor the other?

(laughter) How can we be obligated to lie about this?

(laughter) We cannot, says Shammai. Tell the truth! (laughter)

Hillel, on the other hand, has an opposing opinion: One must flatter her by saying yes, she is gracious, she is beautiful, even if she's blind, half a limb and not so attractive. And I must say, between the two sages, I prefer Hillel. Sure, Shammai is on the side of truth, but Hillel is on the side of a poor young maiden [00:44:00] who on her big wedding day suffers even more than usual from being neither beautiful nor gracious. She needs Hillel and his companions, not Shammai and his severity. And in truth, have you ever seen a maiden getting married who is not beautiful and charming?

All disputes generally play themselves out between the disciples, not between their masters. During their tenure, Shammai and Hillel had only three personal confrontations. Yet

the text emphasized that even among the disciples, the relationship never lacked courtesy. Their children married each other. They ate at each other's tables. They are friends. Never an unpleasant word severs them. They are linked by a moving respect which, by honoring the Torah, bestows honor on them. A story: [00:45:00] *Amar Rabbi Abba amar Shmuel*: This is what Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel. During three years, the students of Shammai and those of Hillel debated over the interpretation of various laws. One group claimed "Our notion is correct." The other replied, "No, ours is the right one." Finally, a heavenly voice was heard: "Eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chayyim" "Both of you are truthful. All of you are relaying the living word of God." A question: One group says one thing and the other the opposite, so how can both be right, or for that matter wrong? There's a marvelous story of a rebbe and his wife, when a man came to the rebbe complaining about the other, and the rebbe said, "You are right." Then the other one came, complaining about the first one, and said, "You are right." But the wife says, "How can both of them be right?" And he says, "You are also right." [00:46:00] (laughter) So then, if both are right, why would the heavenly voice make do by only emphasizing the positive sides, if both are also wrong? And the explanation, perhaps, this: If both are wrong, each side could consider it within its right to look down on the other, but not

if they are right. Since each reflects divine thought, such thought deserves respect, even from the dissenter. This is, after all, one of the captivating idiosyncrasies of Talmudic dialogue. It is based on respect. I was going to say tolerance, but this is not the right word. I believe we should fight intolerance, but I do not say we should practice tolerance. Why? Tolerance implies a dose of condescension from a superior [00:47:00] attitude, as if to say, "I tolerate your view, I tolerate your positions," but who am I to tolerate anything in you? Thus, will I continue my opposition to intolerance? Of course, but it will be in the name of the word I prefer: respect. Rather than say "I tolerate you," I would say, "I respect your views."

In Hebrew, "respect" and "honor" have the same root, *kavod* and *kibud*. To respect the other for whom he or she is gives honor to both people. Remember, what is the name of a learned scholar, a revered sage? What is the greatest compliment you can pay anyone in Jewish scholarly circles? Not *hakham*, but *talmid hakham*. Not "sage," but "a disciple of the sage." That means that the greatest of us remains [00:48:00] a disciple with much to learn from his own masters, from his own friends, and from his own disciples -- and from his disciples above all, says the Talmud. Consequently, no one is supposed to remain

obstinate in his opinions. Each must say that he or she is only a student and that the person to whom we are speaking is as well. Who remains a master to all of us? God.

When we place emphasis on mutual respect, which, it seems to me, is the basis of Talmudic teaching, we tend to naturally insist on the fact that all fanaticism has no place there. But it is there, let's be frank about it. Indeed, it is in the Bible. Take Amalek. The command comes to wipe out all Amalekites, which means, suppose I meet in the street an [00:49:00] Amalekite now. It is the law of the Torah, "m'doraita", as we say, that I should kill that person. Luckily the sages have decided that when the ten tribes were dispersed, the time of Ezekias, of Sancheriv, all the tribes mixed, all the peoples mixed, and nobody will ever know who is an Amalekite, so I'm safe. (laughter)

Pinchas the Bible is known for its fanaticism, as is the prophet Elijah. Fanaticism is almost by definition a paralysis, if not a death of thought, thus of dialogue, for a fanatic is as if thought were to remain in a vacuum, forbidding all contact with any other form of reflection. In other words, the complete opposite of a Talmudic spirit, from which thought is always in motion, searching and looking inside for new roads to explore,

disturbing or dazzling mysteries [00:50:00] to penetrate, and debate them. Does this mean that there is no reference to fanatics or to intolerance in Talmudic practice, or in general in previous Jewish history?

In evoking the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, the Talmud speaks quite a bit about the small but vocal and active sect called the *Sikrikim*. This name referred to a *sikar*, or knife or dagger, that these fighters carried on their belts. Selflessly resorting to violence, they attacked Roman soldiers from behind and killed them. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's nephew took part in its activities. It was he and his friends who had a sage secretly removed in a coffin from the city while under siege. Were they heroes? The Talmud does not confer this title on them. On the contrary, the sages denounced their methods. In order to [00:51:00] push the famished population towards despair and anger, the *Sikrikim* set fire to food stores. Again, we are talking about a small minority of courageous patriots, but with fanatic ideology, did not win over the support of the people or of its spiritual leaders. As for ideas, freedom of expression is absolute. Action alone counts.

Elisha ben Abuyah is reprimanded, if not banished, not for what he says, but for what he does. As long as he didn't try to turn

students away from their courses, he was allowed to speak. So long as he did not betray the sages, his comrades, his former friends, to the Roman police -- which he did -- he was not considered a renegade.

Yet how is it possible to explain [00:52:00] the case of Rabbi Eliezer, son of Hyrcanus, whom we had mentioned earlier? He is one of the great figures in the Talmud. We find him in the place of honor for all the important debates. Yet at the end of his life, he was excommunicated. Because he was in a minority, one against many? Actually, because he refused to give in to an almost unanimous decision adopted for a thoroughly practical problem. The lesson from this sad and disgraceful incident, ideas and opinions from a minority are considered with the respect due to them, but it behooves this minority to bow before the majority, and once the voting results are known, to act accordingly.

The case implicated, therefore, another great sage, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah. It tells the story of intolerance [00:53:00] in Talmud. In the course of a stormy debate over the purity or impurity of an oven by a certain *akhnai*, Rabbi Eliezer, son of Hyrcanus, stood up against Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Hananiah, and the majority of the academy. "If I am right,"

cried the first, "may this carob tree show some sign of it." At that moment, the tree was uprooted and carried far away. "It is not the tree that will tell us how to judge," responded Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah." "If I am right," continued Rabbi Eliezer, "may the river flowing nearby give some indication." Right away, the current changed directions and went backwards. "It's not the river that will show us the way of the law," answered Rabbi Yehoshua. "May the walls of this house prove to us that I am right," said Rabbi Eliezer. Immediately the walls moved and were going to collapse, but Rabbi Yehoshua stopped them. "The walls have [00:54:00] no say in the matter here," he said. Thus, out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, they stopped, and they remained like that, half collapsing. But in deference to Rabbi Eliezer, they did not stand back either. And so finally a heavenly voice was heard, "What do you want from my son, Rabbi Eliezer? Don't know you know that he is right?" And Rabbi Yehoshua in response said, "The Torah is not in heaven but down here. It will not be some heavenly word that settled this debate." (laughter) Alone against them all, Rabbi Eliezer was punished. On that day, we are told, all his judgments were reversed, and he was banished from the ranks of the academy. So of course, naturally, we wonder why so much severity. Why such intolerance [00:55:00] towards an illustrious colleague and master? Why is it so bad to rise up, not only against the

majority, but to want to be right on one's own against everyone else? We do that occasionally. His downfall was not in keeping his obstinate stance, but first in having disturbed the laws of nature; second, in trying through his supernatural powers to influence a discussion in the legal context; and third, in having forced his peers to act against heaven's will. Rabbi Eliezer is not afraid of standing alone or solitary. His positions are often unique and sometimes confused. For example, he's against the education of women, but this is not what caused his excommunication. Talmud means "democracy"; it [00:56:00] inspires respect; it encourages creativity. Though banished, Rabbi Eliezer was visited by students even afterwards.

So fanaticism doesn't exist in Talmudic ethic, but it surfaces everywhere else, transcending political landscapes and religious affiliations. It evokes, on more than one level, the plighted periods of the Middle Ages and bears several names: integrism, fundamentalism, extremism, segregation, and of course anti-Semitism. Their reach is the same, their goal as well. They see and they want us to see in each person a potential prisoner or eventual victim. One only need listen to the noise and fury that ravage our planet to understand that fanaticism now amounts to a contagious illness that threatens us all. We especially see it in countries where this political dictatorship or

absolute allegiance exist. In the beginning, while it's still
[00:57:00] small, with only a limited streak of action,
fanaticism is harmful and hypocritical, preparing the next step
as well as the end of its ambitions. Once in power, it is used
at first to break down the liberty of any dissidents and to
confiscate the right to property, happiness, and hope.
Glorifying rejection, exclusion in all domains, such as
knowledge and faith, the fanatic seeks to deny the humanity of
man by provoking intellectual mutilation and blindness. Indeed,
the fanatic appeals to the most vile, the lowest, and the
ugliest in people. By humiliating the creation, he humiliates
the creator himself. Trapped in his dogmas, as if in a prison,
the fanatic makes God his prisoner. Preferring shortcuts,
stubborn, sullen, living in a universe where everything is black
[00:58:00] and white, where the other is either friend or foe,
believer or infidel, terrified by anything abstract or complex,
the fanatic speaks in clichés, and feeling misunderstood always,
never hesitates to use his fists. Violence is his language,
which in turn is inevitably vulgar, offensive, obscene.
Whatever its color or ideology, fanaticism draws its strength
from intolerance, contempt, hate. It's quite simple: a fanatic
never has a question, only answers. He doubts nothing; he is
glued to certainties. He grimaces but does not smile; he sneers

but does not laugh. What is he missing? His sense of humor. A fanatic never has a sense of humor.

Something else that doesn't exist in the Talmud, and it is torture, which is, for me and [00:59:00] for some of us, the worst of humiliations, especially by Romans and the Inquisitions, and I am afraid that we in America for a while, at least in the beginning of the Iraqi War, practiced torture, which I find abhorrent, but still we live in democracy, and when it was discovered, it was changed and denounced. We know that for a while, torture was a universal plague under each regime. In Russia, Czar Peter the Great had abolished torture, and since then, all his successors, each in their own turn, had to abolish it anew. It survived them all, and now all of them understood that when a prisoner is humiliated, the torturer himself is humiliated. But it is entirely absent in the Talmud. The reason is simple: The Talmudic law [01:00:00] gives no value to confessions, because the text says "*Ein adam mashim etzmo resha.*" "Man is unable to accuse himself." Therefore torture does not assist in an accusation, so what's the use of it? Two thousand years before the American constitution, in the Talmud, the fifth amendment was the law, and one Supreme Court resident in America at one point went to the Jewish Theological Seminary, years and years and years ago, to spend a Shabbat and a weekend

with Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*, because he heard of that, because we are so proud in America, the fifth amendment, and here we Jews come and say, "Come on, 2,000 years ago we already knew it (laughter) and practiced it." For centuries and centuries the academies and yeshivot [01:01:00] of the Jewish world in the Holy Land and diaspora, many have tried to propose a definition of the Talmud that has so fascinated generations of students and masters. All agree that we are talking about a gigantic work covering all aspects of human behavior, of all our collective memories, all our individual and community hopes, all the challenges that confront us Jews through our wanderings. The laws and their applications, the legends and their interpretation, *hafoch ba vехаfoch ba*, teach us the ethics of our fathers. Turn the pages, turn them again, because everything is there. So we find nationalists and mystics, doctors, philosophers, religious leaders all share a profound love for the Talmud. Too few insist on one of the qualities giving it such great beauty, such rare virtue, is dialogue.

So, [01:02:00] to say that fanaticism is dangerous is to express a fear at the same time as a desire to lessen it. When does a religion become destructive? Then it is overcome by absolute [currents?]. A nation becomes threatening when it begins to dominate, in its thought or by force, the right to security and

the happiness of its neighbors. Originally of prophetic origin, particularly in its social structure, communism locks itself on a path of ideological corruption and totalitarian temptation when it shows fanaticism as a means of easy and efficient defense. Wars over race, religion, ideologies, economic interests, they all have in common this fanatic faith in the moral power of superiority on the one hand and in the moral superiority of power on the other. Violent in essence, [01:03:00] fanaticism is harmful and deceitful. Falling to the practice of censure and exclusion, the fanatic sees in the other a marionette that he first tries to break, then to manipulate according to his will. The other becomes an object.

Now, in conclusion, just to tell you, anti-Semitism has found, of course, its most popular expression in a pamphlet called *The Protocols of the Sages [sic] of Zion*, which we shall discuss not next Thursday but Thursday afterwards. The whole profanation of whatever is beautiful in life is in that pamphlet. What do we believe when we study the Talmud? That only a human being is able to contain fanaticism, a veritable human plague since the origins of history. [01:04:00] Only the human being is capable and guilty of hate, which is simultaneously its source and its product. Only human beings can trace its borders and measure its depth before disarming it. When we try to see what we can

do with dialogue, with the respect for one another, it's enough for us to open any Talmudic tractate and study. Study brings us all together. Thank you. (applause)

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